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Gun Control

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gun CONTROL

When life hands you a gun, shoot the target.

BY KIANA ROPPE DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATION RENAE MEINES PHOTO ISAAC BIEHL

With both hands wrapped around the Smith and Wesson M&P22 pistol, I lean forward a bit, tighten my grip, align my sights toward that no-good white piece of paper, take one last deep breath and pull the trigger.

Six shots slowly ring out, each one hitting the target then barreling into the ground as they fling up dirt. Simultaneously, the leftover brass shell casings fly out of the gun's barrel in an off-kilter spiral, each one making a "cling, cling" sound as they hit the ground.

I breathe in, and breathe out. This is the calm.



This country is obsessed with guns. Murder, assault or negligence with guns is blasted all over the news daily. Guns are a staple tool in almost any form of TV or movie entertainment. 'Bad guys' use guns to murder or scare good people and 'good guys' use guns to stop the bad guys or save the world. Guns are so ingrained into our country's DNA that it seems we never stop talking about them.

Naturally, I grew up wanting to be a badass like Jason Bourne in "The Bourne Identity" or Bob Lee Swagger in "Shooter." The ability to wield a gun to save lives seems cool. However, ever since I can remember, I've had dreams (it would be safe to call them nightmares, but they don't bother me anymore) about people chasing after me and shooting at me with handguns.

From the hallway of my house, I peer out the uncovered window into the darkness. It's nighttime and I'm the only one awake; my mom and my sister are sound asleep. Then, I see movement in the darkness and my heart stops—there is a man with a bright red beard

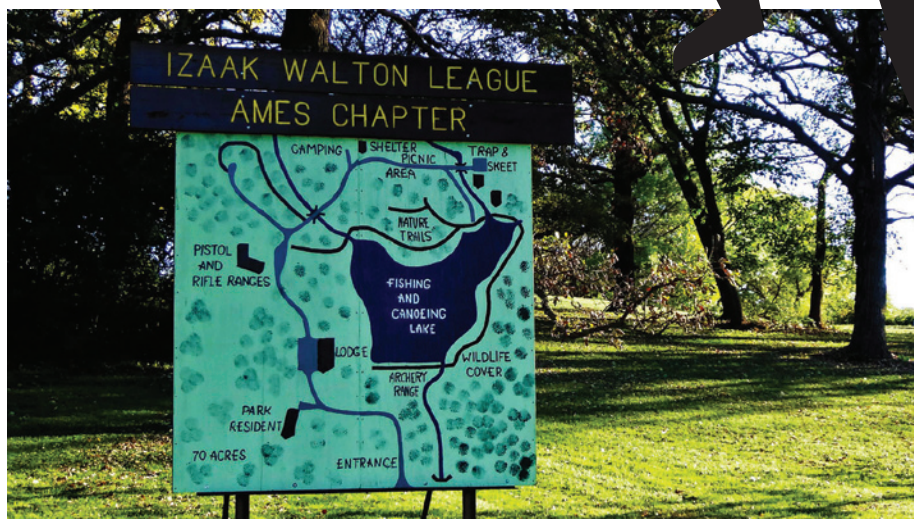
standing in my yard staring at me. He then begins to slowly creep forward with a gun in his hand. I turn to my left and run down the hallway, unable to speak. I continue to race into the dining room where I can see out of uncovered windows on both sides of the house. But there are men with guns at each one as well—hunting me. I am completely surrounded.

Recently, I had a dream where a man was attacking my mom, so I picked up my favorite cooking pan (I like to leave it on the stove in case I want to make cheesy hashbrowns) and beat him with it—saving my mom. It was then that I realized that I could fight back in my dreams; I didn't have to be a victim.

I could be Jason Bourne... or James Bond, or the badass character from any action-packed movie involving guns. That's right—I can be a fashion major who wears red lipstick and a badass who knows how to shoot a gun. So at 9 a.m. on a cold Saturday morning, I did just that.



"I can be a fashion major who wears red lipstick and a badass who knows how to shoot a gun."



After getting a bit lost and completely missing the hidden road I was supposed to turn on, I arrive at the Ames Izaak Walton League to meet up with my instructor Eric Tull and his wife Jessica.



Tull is tall in stature (more than 6 foot), and kind in manner. He grew up in small-town Iowa with a family of gun users; his dad had been in the deputy sheriff reserves and liked to hunt, his mom grew up around guns and knew how to shoot, and both of his sisters were part of their high school's skeet-shooting team. He received his first gun—a 20-gauge shotgun—at his 12th birthday.

"It was probably the best present I ever got," Tull happily recalls.

December of that same year, Tull's father took him deer hunting and although they never saw any deer, he enjoyed the experience. The pair continued to go deer hunting every year.

For Christmas when he was 19, Tull got his first pistol and fell in love. He went on to acquire more pistols and take a few training classes. After informally teaching others how to use guns for years and not finding a career in college that he was interested in, Tull became a certified trainer and started his own company called Nexus Defensive Training.

He is certified to teach a four-hour introductory course called "First Steps Pistol," an eight hour course called "Basic Pistol Course," an eight hour course on "Personal Protection Inside the Home" (hint: don't keep shrubbery under your windows outside—robbers can hide there), a course to train volunteers who would supervise others at the range called the "NRA Range Safety Course," and a course to obtain a Utah Concealed Carry Permit which is recognized in 31 states. Sufficed to say—Tull knows exactly what he's talking about and will be a great person to learn from.

He met his wife Jessica in 2003 while attending the University of Chicago and they got hitched in 2008. Jessica matches Tull in kindness and is happy to support him on all of his gun-wielding adventures—today's training included.

After we park our respective cars near the range, Tull gets out of his car and hands me my "eyes and ears," meaning clear safety glasses and electronic ear muffs that can protect my ears, but still allow me to hear everything that's going on. "I probably look pretty goofy in these," I think to myself as I put them on.



It's a cold and windy morning in early October. Prepared for a chill, I'm wearing a lightweight black jacket and a pair of thin knit gloves to keep my hands warm between shots. With the electronic earmuffs on, the roaring wind sounds a bit like rushing water. I find it soothing.

We then walk down a flight of stairs to the outdoor range. With each step, my anticipation grows. An L-shaped wooden frame serves as a shelter for shooters to sit/stand behind. The area beyond the shelter to my left extends pretty far and has a couple rows of dirt that look about four feet high for shooters to fire at. Instead of walking to that area, we head straight where a giant wall of dirt called a "berm" forms the backdrop for shooters and their targets.

Tull and Jessica start to unload their bags and set up three cardboard targets shaped to resemble a person's head and torso downrange (the area you are meant to shoot at). They then staple three sheets of blank white paper on each. The mission: shoot the paper.

The crisp white paper didn't do anything to deserve getting shot at. Why would I want to destroy it along with all the good that could be done with it (think crayons)? Then, I remember the years of torture that paper facilitated; tests, after tests, after tests. OK, I'm ready to shoot.

Safety is extremely important when handling a gun. To perfect my stance and learn how to hold the gun correctly without the pressure of handling a real one, Tull handed me a blue plastic "dummy" gun to practice with.

"The idea is to get a lot of hand contact on the gun," he says, showing me how to place my hands as he talks. "That way, the gun won't recoil as much."

There are three rules that I need to continuously implement called the NRA Rules For Safe Gun Handling:



Always keep the gun pointed in a safe direction (downrange)



Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot



Always keep the gun unloaded until ready to use

Because I proved that I could follow the rules, Tull brought out a real gun—a .22-caliber pistol. He shows me how to load the magazine, first with these small, red plastic bullets (which don't shoot when you pull the trigger), then with .22-caliber bullets. I pick one up and study it closely, noting that there were a few rows of indentations toward the top that reminded me of the edging on a gear. It's easy to see that engineering, creativity and craftsmanship went into the making of each bullet. To my surprise, I find it quite beautiful, especially when I compare the initial look of the bullet to one of the hollow brass casings on the ground.

Tull then demonstrates the proper way to shoot a gun while seated. My turn. I sit with my feet shoulder width apart and my back straight. The gun lies safely on the table in front of me. To pick it up, I bring my right hand around the lower part of the pistol, keeping my pointer finger above (not on) the trigger. I then grab the magazine that I recently loaded and insert it into the gun.

As I'm preparing the gun, a nearby rifle user shoots, sending a bullet thundering through the air. "Clayton," I instantly think, being reminded of the Disney classic "Tarzan" (In case you have forgotten, "Clayton" is the name of the bad guy who wants to kill the gorillas, and Tarzan—being new to English—mistakenly thinks "Clayton" is the name of a gunshot, not the guy holding the gun).

Returning my focus to the gun in my hand, I bring my left hand up to the slider (which

is locked back because the chamber was empty), jerk it back even more, then release it and allow it to slide forward into proper position. I wrap my left hand below the trigger guard on the gun, stretch my arms out on the table, lean my body forward a bit, tighten my grip, align the front sight with the rear sights and pull the trigger. The bullet makes a clean hole through the target.

"You got it on the paper," Tull notes. "Nice job!"

I shot a gun for the first time... and it wasn't how I thought it would be. From all of the media coverage and movie focus on guns as weapons, I thought I would be afraid and that it would be unnerving to shoot a gun. But outside on the range where the biggest issue is the cold weather and wind, it was relaxing to just be in the moment and focus only on what I was doing.

"When you're shooting, there's nothing else you can think about," Tull says, happily describing his favorite thing about shooting a gun. "All the problems, the homework, the work, anything else—it's just gone while you're shooting. It's nice to just completely focus on one thing. To have everything else [fade away]."

"The calm," as I call it, has lasted well past my first shot. I understand what Tull meant when he said "guns don't just go off" because the whole time—I was in control. I am in control. The best part? My dreams are now filled with run-of-the mill, gun-less attackers. ☺

